

Cyrus the Great in Biblical Prophecy

Contributed by Akbar Nemati

One of the truly astounding prophecies of the Bible is found in the last verse of Isaiah 44, together with chapter 45:1ff, (an unfortunate chapter break). It has to do with Cyrus, king of Persia. According to the historian Herodotus (i.46), Cyrus was the son of Cambyses I. He came to the Persian throne in 559 B.C. Nine years later he conquered the Medes, thus unifying the kingdoms of the Medes and the Persians.

Cyrus is mentioned some 23 times in the literature of the Old Testament. Isaiah refers to Cyrus as Jehovah's "shepherd," the Lord's "anointed," who was providentially appointed to facilitate the divine plan. God would lead this monarch to "subdue nations" and "open doors" (an allusion to the Jews' release from Babylonian captivity). He would make "rough places smooth," i.e., accommodate the Hebrews' return to their Palestinean homeland. He would ultimately be responsible for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the reconstruction of the temple. Amazingly, the king would accomplish these noble tasks even though he did not "know" Jehovah (45:4,5). In other words, though he was a pagan in sentiment and practice, yet, as an unconscious tool in the hands of the Lord, he would contribute mightily to the Jewish cause, and so, indirectly, to the coming of God's greater Anointed, Jesus of Nazareth. The fulfillment of these plain and specific predictions is set forth in 2 Chronicles 36:22,23 and Ezra 1:1-4,7,8; 3:7; 4:3. The Encyclopedia Britannica, an unlikely source, acknowledges that "in 538 [B.C.] Cyrus granted to the Jews, whom Nebuchadrezzar had transported to Babylonia, the return to Palestine and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple" (Vol. 6, 1958, p. 940). H.G. Wells, in his book, *The Outline of History*, concedes that the Jews "returned to their city, Jerusalem" and "rebuilt their temple there under the auspices of Cyrus," the Persian monarch (1931, p. 253). What many people do not realize in reading Isaiah 44:28ff is that this heathen ruler was named by the prophet long before the monarch was even born. Isaiah prophesied in the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). His ministry thus occurred in the latter portion of the 8th century B.C. (ca. 740-701 B.C.). This was some one hundred fifty years before Cyrus came to the throne! Incredible declarations of this nature have led critics (who reject the possibility of predictive prophecy) to suggest that these portions of the book of Isaiah were added much later – after the fact, as it were. A popular reference work states:

"Because the book of Isaiah includes prophecies concerning events during and after the Exile, critical scholars generally attribute portions of the book to one, two, or more prophets in addition to Isaiah (esp. Deutero-Isaiah, chs. 40-55; Trito-Isaiah, chs. 56-66)" (The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary, 1987, p. 531).

Here is an example of how the liberal viewpoint is reflected even by a professor in a Christian university. In discussing the promises set forth in Isaiah 44:26-28, John T. Willis of Abilene Christian University says:

"All of these promises assume that Jerusalem and the cities of Judah have been razed, that the temple is no longer standing, that Cyrus is on the scene and swiftly growing in power, and that the return of the exiles is imminent" (Isaiah, p. 380).

If such is the case, then this material could not possibly have been written by the prophet Isaiah since he died long before these events transpired. The author, in spite of his claim of a conservative approach to the book (p. 31), clearly reflects his opinion that this portion of the book of Isaiah was authored by a writer of the 6th century B.C. (cf. p. 381). Against such a viewpoint we have the assurance of scripture itself. Earlier, in 41:25ff, Isaiah had spoken of the coming of "one . . . from the rising of the sun." Though not called by name, the allusion is clearly to Cyrus, who would bring good tidings regarding Jerusalem. In 41:26, Isaiah makes it plain that the mission of Cyrus was a matter of prophecy, not educated speculation. It is a reflection of compromised faith to postulate a late date for these prophecies. Finally, as an interesting sidelight, we note that Josephus, the Jewish historian, states that the Jews in Babylonian captivity showed Cyrus the prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures which contain his name and described his role in the scheme of God. The historian says that it was this circumstance that motivated the ruler "to fulfill what was written" (Antiquities 11.1.2), and thus to issue his edict permitting Israel's return to her homeland. Excavations at Babylon (1879-82) led to the discovery of a clay barrel, known as the Cyrus Cylinder, which contained a marvelous historical confirmation of the biblical narrative. It portrays the benevolent policies of Cyrus in the following fashion: "All of their peoples I gathered together and restored to their dwelling-places" (see: Ira M. Price, *The Monuments and the Old Testament*, 1899-1907, p. 234). Predictive prophecy is a compelling evidence for the divine origin of the Holy Scriptures.